The name game

Having received the (dubious, some might say) honour of having a species of Australian frog named after me, I was led to reflect on some of the quirks and curiosities of the system which endows animals (and plants) with names dreamed up by scientists. 'My' frog is called *Uperoleia martini* (one of my colleagues instantly and unkindly remarked: Sounds more like a new kind of drink than a new kind of frog). In the description of the animal it is said to have 'moderately long hind limbs' and 'no webbing between the toes', which I can live with quite comfortably. On the other hand it also possesses 'a well-developed supracloacal flap' and 'cream patches in the groin', which are the kinds of thing you don't like even your closest friends to know about.

In fact, though, when an animal is named after a person, it is not because of any perceived resemblance; it is usually because the person either discovered the species or contributed in a significant way to knowledge of the particular group of animals. Thus, in this case, I have worked and published quite extensively on frogs in the genus *Uperoleia*. Similarly there are Australian frogs named for other biologists who have made important contributions to our knowledge of the frog fauna: *daviesae* for Margaret Davies, *littlejohni* for Murray Littlejohn, *spenceri* for Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer, *tyleri* for Michael Tyler, and so on.

I know of one case (no doubt there are more) where a mischievous describer used someone's name in a derogatory sense. In 1855 William Blandowski returned from a fish-collecting expedition to the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers, and set out to publish descriptions of the specimens in the *Transactions of the Philosophical Society of Victoria* (later to become The Royal Society of Victoria). Dispassionate science? No—rather a vehicle for airing his grudges against members of the Society. *Cernua eadesii*, for instance, named in 'honour' of Dr Richard Eades, was characterised as 'a fish easily recognised by its low forehead, big belly and sharp spine.' The scandalised members of the Society understandably ensured that publication was suppressed.

Species don't have to be named after people; indeed the practice is often frowned upon because such name derivations don't tell you anything about the animal itself. There are, as instances of more informative names, other species of *Uperoleia* called *crassa* (Latin, fat or heavy), *micromeles* (Greek, *mikros* small; Greek, *melos* limb), *rugosa* (Latin, wrinkled) and *trachyderma* (Greek, *trachys* rough; Greek, *derma* skin).

This practice may, however, be accompanied by pitfalls of another kind: does the chosen name provide an accurate description of the animal? Is *sapiens* (Latin, wise) really an appropriate designation for ourselves? The Swamp Antechinus is *Antechinus mininus* (Latin *minimus*, smallest), despite the fact that it is among the larger species in the genus. But it is much smaller than members of the genus *Dasyurus*, in which it was originally placed. There is an Australian tree-frog with the specific name *caerulea* (Latin: blue); in fact it is bright green. It turns out that it was described on the basis of an alcohol-preserved dead specimen, and in preservative the green fades to grey-blue. Yet another Australian frog, *Limnodynastes tasmaniensis*, is indeed found in, but is by no means restricted to, Tasmania.

Despite the rigid set of rules that governs the whole business of genus and species names, ingenious taxonomists do find ways to play games with them. The mosquito genus *Aedes*, renowned for its irritating bite, includes among its species *tormentor* and *excrucians*; there is a Canadian biting fly that goes under the name *Chrysops cursim*. In happier vein, English hemipteran specialist George Kirkaldy coined the Greek-sounding term *chisme* (pronounced 'kiss me') and built a seductive series of bug generic names on it, including *Polychisme, Marichisme, Dolichisme, Peggichisme* and the all-embracing invitation *Ochisme*. And, believe it or not, there is an Australian sphecid wasp

called *Aha ha*. The story goes that in 1977 John Evans (then Director of the Australian Museum, Sydney) sent some wasp specimens to an American colleague and wasp researcher; on inspection of the contents of the package the recipient reportedly exclaimed 'Aha! A new genus of wasp!' There turned out to be two species present which he duly named *Aha evansi*, in honour of the sender; and (never one to let a glorious opportunity go by) *Aha ha*.

If, in the spirit of the game, you try to track down the longest scientific animal name of all time, you'll come up with a small, shrimp-like crustacean that lives in Lake Baikal and is called *Brachyuropuskkyodermatogammarus greivlingwmnemnotus*. As far as my Greek and Latin go, it's the 'crustacean with a short tail [and] feet [found on] a dog's skin, [named] in memory of W. Greivling'. I haven't been able to verify this name and in any case I'm not impressed: surely it's just a transparently jokey attempt to create the longest and silliest name possible. On the other hand, I do have a soft spot for the shortest name on record: *Ia io*, an Asian bat. *Ia* was a beautiful maiden in Greek mythology; *Io*, a priestess who became one of Zeus' lovers (as well as being a moon of Jupiter). Writing at a time before political correctness became obligatory, the describer, Oldfield Thomas (1902), explained that use of the names recognised that young women and bats are equally flighty creatures.

And one more element of the name game can produce some oddities. The full scientific name of each creature also includes the name of its author or authors—that is, the person or people who described it—and the year in which the description was published. Thus the *absolutely* complete name of 'my' frog is *Uperoleia martini* Davies and Littlejohn, 1986. The green frog that we met earlier was described by a John White, adding yet another hue to its green/blue confusion. But my current favourite is to be found in *Acta Geologica Sinica* (2012), where the description of a new genus and species of pterosaur, *Moganopterus zhuiana*, is to be found. Four authors take joint credit for discovery and description of this fossil reptile, and their names are Lü, Pu, Xu and Wu. What a shame they didn't also describe *Ia io!*

References

Davies M and Littlejohn MJ (1986) Frogs of the genus *Uperoleia* Gray (Anura: Leptodactylidae) in south eastern Australia. *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* **109**, 111-143.

Lü J, Pu H, Xu L and Wu Y (2012) Largest toothed pterosaur skull from the Early Cretaceous Yixian Formation of western Liaoning, China, with comments on the family Boreopteridae. *Acta Geologica Sinica* **86**, 287-293.

Thomas O (1902) On two new mammals from China. *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* **10** (Ser. 7) 163-166.

Angus Martin
Honorary Principal Fellow in Zoology,
The University of Melbourne, Parkville 3052

One Hundred Years Ago

The Mallee : Ouyen to Pinnaroo.

Botanical notes

By A.D. HARDY

On ascending a small sandy rise of the better sort we looked down into a depression, and were astonished to see a lake of fair size surrounded by low sand-hills, and bright pink in colour, rendered more conspicuous by the green of the pines, quandongs, sandalwood, cabbage, and the rest of the group previously mentioned, and which almost surround the lake. There are four of these lakes close together, and the fact that they are situated at a spot where on old maps "Salt Lakes" was recorded, suggests that the lakes were known before, but were not then pink. The colour is in the salt, not in the water, as far as one could judge. A small quantity of the shallow water appeared colourless as a similar quantity from "the deep blue sea," and seems due to chemical impurity in the salt, and not to an organism, such as a microscopic alga. At the leeward side of the larger lake a fringe of drowned insects—mostly Coleoptera, and containing "lady-birds," &c.— marked a ripple limit, beyond which was a strip of wet pink salt. Outside this was a belt of dry, almost white salt, but with intense pink showing at any fracture or vent, and then mud and sand, salsolaceous plants, and grassy slope up to the edge of the depression, where grew a variety of trees already named and Mallee eucalypts.

From *The Victorian Naturalist* **XXX**, p. 158, January 8, 1914